

Day of the Sepulchral Night

By Jean Rabe; Illustrations by Matt Busch

"Wonder what we'll find?" Solum'ke mused for what I guessed was the half-dozen time since we set out.

"Maybe nothing," I replied -- again. "It's just a legend, after all. Don't get your hopes up."

"Well, Diergu-Rea Duhnes'rd, love of my life, I think there's something to it," she persisted. She formed her bulbous, mottled lips into a delightful pout. "The Qwohog thinks so, too. Otherwise, he wouldn't have talked us into renting this sail barge."

Talked you, I mentally corrected her. Talked you into spending the last of my credits during the Day of the Sepulchral Night.

If we'd stayed in the city -- and on dry ground -- we could have booked passage on that Corellian corvette occupying most of the port and got back into Imperial lanes. There we could pick up a few leads on lucrative contracts. I'd spent so many credits on our brief vacation on this backwater world that I needed to turn a good bounty to replenish my normally bulging account.

We'd come to Zelos II several days ago for a little relaxation. The place is known for its tourist spots -- elaborate spas and cantinas that cater to all manner of beings and all manner of tastes and appetites. For the past several days I'd been lavishly doling out my credits on the exhibitions and in the casinos, and -- of course -- on the more-than-suitable accommodations in which I had been romancing the lovely Solum'ke. Like me, she's a Weequay, a tough looking humanoid with alluring coarse, gnarled skin. Hers is an enchanting desert tan, shaded darker in just the right places and relatively smooth across her beautiful bald head. Mine is a dark gray, nearly the color of the magnificent wiry topknot that extends to the center of my back. We make an attractive couple.

We don't *have* to use words between us -- not spoken ones, anyway. Ours is the ability to excrete pheromones that allow us to communicate our moods and desires. Right now my desire was to be elsewhere, but I kept my pheromones in check so as not to give me away and disappoint her.

"Look at the moons," she breathed huskily. Her pheromones said she was in a very romantic mood. "They're beautiful."

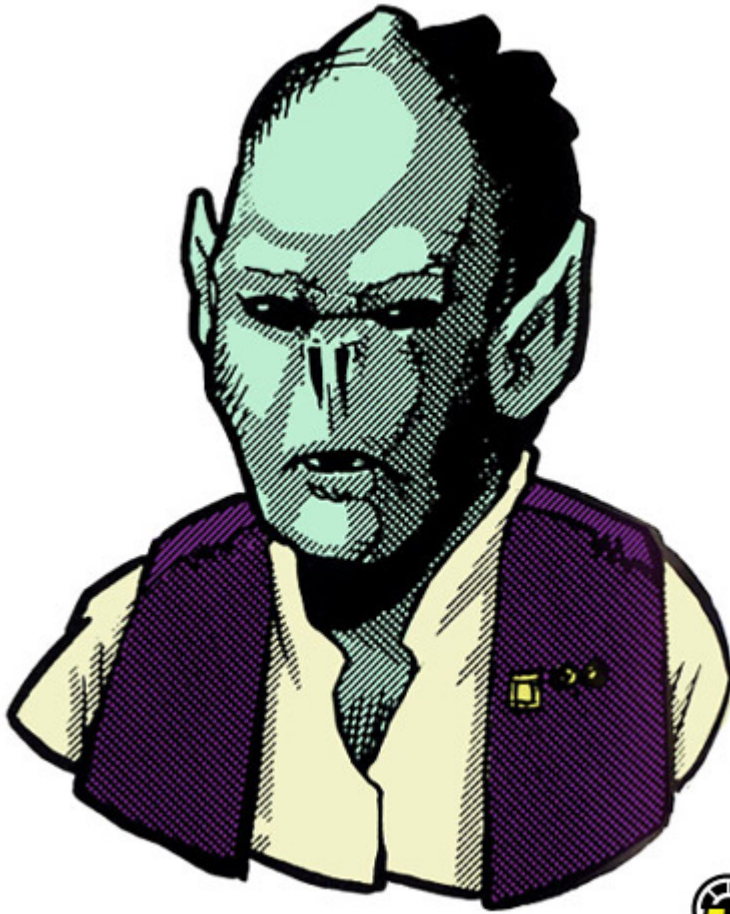
We don't *have* to use words. But I like the sound of her voice, and she knows it. I followed her gaze. Zelos II has four moons, and I had read somewhere that moonlight is an essential ingredient to an amorous environment. That's one of the reasons I suggested we come to this planet.

Unfortunately, it was also because of those four moons that we were now on an understaffed sail barge skimming a meter above the Great Zelosi Sea and leaving land uncomfortably far behind.

K'zk, the Qwohog piloting the rented barge, had been sitting at a nearby table in the restaurant we had selected for dinner last night. He had looked small and out of place among his human-like Zelosian companions -- whom he was failing to convince to make this very trip. In fact, he pretty much looked out of place away from water. That drew Solum'ke's attention, and she immediately became more interested in K'zk's diatribe than in my soft-spoken words of adoration and the grilled lemcock haunch sizzling on her plate.

Qwohogs are bipedal amphibians. This one was pale green, almost matching the restaurant's drapes. He had silvery-blue scales atop his head, pointed ears, and long thin fingers that he waved every time he uttered a word. His speech was funny and clipped, made harsh and nasally by the vocalizer mask he wore. I'd learned that Qwohogs normally communicate by sending vibrations through the water -- freshwater -- and need a mask to be understood above the waves. Saltwater isn't their preferred environment, but apparently this Qwohog and his fellows had swallowed their fears and were about to strike off across the Great Zelosi Sea. They just needed someone along who wasn't averse to maybe getting in the saltwater.





"Isn't this romantic?" Solum'ke whispered, interrupting my musings. She demurely leaned against the rail and stared at three of Zelos II's moons. They hung low in the sky, practically touching the sea. "The moons, the water, the breeze across my skin. Truly romantic."

"Not if you're a Zelosian," I said as I moved closer and placed my hand on the small of her back. "Right now it's midmorning, and under any other circumstance you couldn't see those moons. The fourth moon's aligned with the sun. The natives are superstitious enough as it is about the moons and night and day. But on this particular day their behavior is extreme -- or so I can tell from the datachips I've skimmed. No wonder K'zk couldn't get any of the natives to come with him. Suicides, insanity, unfounded hysteria. In fac..."

"All right," she said flatly, the whimsy suddenly gone from her voice. "It's an eclipse. Nothing romantic about an eclipse, huh? At least not to you. Hysteria. Such a romantic word."

"The Day of the Sepulchral Night," I said, thinking I should say something to get the mood back. I shouldn't have gotten analytical on her. "Not romantic in and of itself, certainly. But everything's romantic - and perfect -- when you're with me."

She grinned, revealing a pearly row of wide, blunt teeth, and settled against me. "I'm so glad we came to this place."

I kept my pheromones in control, smiled, and thought about my credits, which were continuing to evaporate on sail barge rent with each kilometer of sea we crossed. "Nowhere else could we have seen this day of night," I answered as I held her close.

The Zelosians' culture is wrapped around day and night -- we both learned that our first day on the planet. Light is good, darkness is bad, according to their philosophy. And during this extremely rare eclipse, the natives lock themselves indoors in abject terror. The cantinas and casinos close, the spas are boarded up, and only non-Zelosian ships in the port come and go. Even I had to admit the morning sky looked a little eerie.

The reflection of the three full moons, a sallow blue, a pallid violet, and a glimmering green a shade darker than K'zk the Qwohog, hit the small waves, sending patterns of light dancing toward the prow and the horizon.

I squinted at a spot far in front of us. Something was breaking up the light show.

"Wreck off starboard!" one of the four Qwohog crewmen called. It was a scant crew, the Zelosians who worked the barge taking the day off to hide. My rent had paid for the craft only -- K'zk provided the crew.

"There, K'zk!" a stocky Qwohog shouted. "That wave-skimmer's busted good. Must've run aground on the rocks!" The Qwohog gestured wildly toward jagged shards of hull that floated on the dark water, scattered amid bits of torn sail and rigging.

A coral spike jutted defiantly in the center of the refuse. The ruined wave-skimmer's masthead, a remarkably buxom Zelosian woman, was caught against the spike and thumped hollowly like a beating heart with each lapping wave. There were bodies, most bobbing face-down, the life long since seeped out of them. A few men were draped over the larger pieces of hull and might still be alive. It was impossible to tell from this distance, and the matter was becoming moot. I spied a tiny dome-shaped pate cutting through the water -- *melk*. The scaly rodent-sized beast rose, rolled its eyes back and opened its mouth. In an instant it had begun to feast on one of the possible survivors. Other *melk* were appearing, about two dozen, I guessed. I imagined the waves, painted black by the eclipse, were becoming tinted red with blood.

K'zk padded toward us and peered toward the coral spike and slowly shook his head. "Too many shoals around here. Tide's too low. Any skimmer captain worth his water would have known better, wouldn't have taken a skimmer into these parts." He ran his slender fingers across his scales. "Lower the sails!" he called through his mask. "Hold our position! I don't want us drifting any closer." Softer, he said to the closest Qwohog, "Take a sail raft over. See if there might be any survivors. I'll not risk this barge going into those shallows for any man. Diergu-Rea, do you mind going with him? Little shorthanded because of the eclipse, you know."

I scowled. I didn't like the water, but I knew how to swim, so I wasn't afraid of hopping in a little sail raft. But I didn't want our captain to spend the rest of the day picking through bloating bodies. With so many melk feasting, the odds of finding someone alive were about as great as finding a veelgeg in a kemlish pulled from Kryndyn's deep bay. Nil, in other words. I wasn't worried about the melk looking to me for dinner. With so much flesh in the water, they'd leave the sail raft alone. What worried me was the waste of time.

We were here to find Zelosian's Chine -- or not find it, more likely -- and return to the relative safety of the Kryndyn spaceport. I thought about voicing my objection, since I was financing this little trip, but one of the Qwohogs cut me off.

"Found a couple of live ones, K'zk!" An alert Qwohog had a pair of macrobinoculars pressed to his eyes and trained on the water. He was gesturing with a spindly arm.

I let out a deep breath and headed toward the sail raft. "Yeah, I'll go."

"Me, too," Solum'ke added excitedly. Her pheromones told me she was honestly anxious to help.

We climbed into the raft, reached for the syntherope dispenser to lower it a bit, then we kicked on the repulsorlift switch. The tiny craft settled about a half a meter above the water. I glanced back at K'zk, who was checking over the barge's repulsorlift unit.

Our Qwohog mate guided the sail raft among the refuse. From the looks of the broken deck plates and the floating, bent mast, I guessed the wave-skimmer had been a little less than half the size of the sail barge. Its lift mechanism probably wasn't powerful enough to float it high above the spires, and hence the skimmer had struck one and become crippled.

The smell of the bodies wasn't strong yet, suggesting the men probably died around dawn. Still, it was enough to make Solum'ke wrinkle her pretty nostrils. She., pointed toward the two men the Qwohog had miraculously spotted. Humans, not Zelosians like most of the unfortunates face-down in the water. They were clinging desperately to a couple of cargo crates lashed to another coral spike. It kept them out of the water and away from melk, but it was a precarious perch. The men waved frantically and called to us. The sail raft scraped against a ridge edging just above the surface as we made our way toward them. I glanced over the side, the moonlight revealing a shallow reef. I could've stretched my arm over the side and touched it if I wasn't afraid a melk would bite my hand off. If we'd have taken the sail barge in to rescue these men, we might've run aground, too, and been melk food.

As we pulled alongside the crates, I helped the survivors in. They were pale men with dark brown hair that was matted with blood. Their features hinted that they were Corellian -- far from our home, but not at all that far from the Corellian corvette that was in port. If they were from that ship, they might be our free ride out of here --transportation in exchange for our saving their lives.

The older one looked to be in worse shape. His lip was split, and a deep gash along his leg was swelling, probably becoming infected. It looked like a melk had bit him and spit him back out. A primitive gaffhook at his side was crusted with blood and made me wonder if he had managed to take a piece out of the reptile.

"Thank the moons someone saw us," the younger man said. "We'd have been dead by evening if you hadn't come along."

"Anyone else alive?" Solum'ke asked.

The pair shook their heads and found a spot in the center of the sail raft, settling heavily onto the seat. "They're sleeping in the bellies of the melk," the eldest said. He extended his hand to me, and I shook it. It was terribly cold. He'd been in the water a while. He introduced himself as Hanugar, and the younger survivor as Sevik.

"What happened?" I found myself asking.

"A coral reef and a low tide because of the eclipse," Hanugar said. "The wave-skimmer we rented struck it late last night. Cracked the hull open and ruined the repulsorlift mechanism. It was a good ship, but the captain was nervous, wanting to get home before the Day of the Sepulchral Night. When we hit, we took on water too fast to do anything to save her."

"What were you doing so far from the coast?" Solum'ke wondered aloud.

Sevik shrugged. "Sightseeing. The regular tourist stuff."

The Qwohog steered the sail raft back to the barge, while we listened to Hanugar and Sevik explain how they were barely able to tie the cargo containers together and hang onto a coral spike to escape being melk bait. They seemed genuinely thankful for the rescue, and volunteered to pay for our passage offworld. My hunch was right. They were from the big corvette in port.

Once on deck, Solum'ke looked over the Corellians' wounds. She has a knack for fashioning poultices and bandages -- Quay knows she's had to bandage me plenty of times after I ended up on the wrong end of a cantina fight.

"What brought you out here so late at night?" Sevik asked us. It was a fair question -- we'd asked it of him.

"Sightseeing. The regular tourist stuff," Solum'ke replied.

"Honeymooning," I whispered in answer so softly that he couldn't hear. I grinned and turned away, knowing Solum'ke wouldn't tell the Corellians the real reason we were out here -- hunting for treasure that according to K'zk was buried in Zelosian's Chine.

From somewhere behind me, I heard K'zk order one of his fellows to bring the Corellians some food. As the pair devoured the meal, I listened to their idle banter. K'zk was telling them we were heading south, thinking about skimming toward the Bryndas Islands where the more exotic spas could be found. The Qwohog sounded convincing. *Ha!* I thought to myself. *He had tried to convince the Zelosians at the restaurant to come out on this fool treasure hunt with him. But they'd have nothing to do with it because of the eclipse. Then he turned his charms on Solum'ke and succeeded. Treasure appealed to her.*

I heard the flap of the sails rising and billowing above me, the rev of the repulsorlift engine. Time to be on our way again.

K'zk had told us he couldn't go after the treasure himself. It was the problem with saltwater. He couldn't breathe it, and being submerged in it could make his skin blister. Going after the treasure might entail getting wet -- and hence his need for someone to help him. He said we'd split whatever we found fifty-fifty.

I felt the barge veer to the right to avoid another dangerous coral ridge.

K'zk claimed that according to Zelosian legend, during the Day of the Sepulchral Night the tides would be at their lowest point. Several miles offshore of the main continent, the crest of the sunken mountain ridge called Zelosian's Chine would poke above the waves. Supposedly great wealth rested within a cave inside the crest -- treasure that once belonged to a merchant prince. According to the legend, nearly two hundred years ago during another rare eclipse, the prince's ship was caught in Zelos' gravity well and pulled into the atmosphere and crashed into the chine. The prince survived and directed his men to bury his treasure in a cave along the ridge. He intended to make a raft of part of his ruined ship, sail into a port, and purchase a ship that would take him back to his treasure and then offworld.

But according to the legend, he drowned before he got to shore. The melk probably ate him. And in the decades in between and since, no one had recovered the prince's treasure. Not the Zelosians, because they wouldn't go out during the Day of the Sepulchral Night. And not the tourists, because the legend was supposedly a closely guarded secret. K'k wouldn't say how he came by the tale.

"The chine, K'zk! I see Zelosian's Chine!" one of the Qwohogs roared through his vocalizer mask.

I skeptically peered over the rail. Nothing but choppy water. I couldn't see what the Qwohog was so excited about.

"K'zk?" I heard a Qwohog prompt. "We goin' in?"

I felt the sail barge ease forward, then I looked past the bowsprit. There, a couple



hundred yards out, something edged above the waves. At first glance I thought it was the spiny backbone of some great sea creature. I felt my hand drift to my blaster. But the backbone didn't move, and I relaxed a little. It was nothing more than another coral ridge.

Solum'ke was at my side. She had left Sevik and Hanugar and had silently snuck up behind me. "This has to be it," she breathed. "This has to be Zelosian's Chime."

"You don't know that," I gently warned. "There's lots of coral ridges around here and..."

Her dark eyes sparkled and her wide mouth fell open as we neared the ridge.

The moons illuminated the peaks that jutted above the surface about four meters or so. There were a few deep shadows amid the rocks -- caves, I figured. The largest was round, like the eye of some immense beast, and it was toward the top. The smallest were just above the surface of the waves.

I heard the sails being lowered and the hum of the repulsorlift engine dropped to a whisper.

K'zk quickly explained he didn't want to chance the sail barge hull on finding any dark rocks hiding just above the surface, said he didn't want it ending up like the Corellians' wave-skimmer.

"The legend of Zelosian's Chime," Sevik whistled.

"That's what you were out here after, wasn't it?" Solum'ke asked him.

The Corellian nodded. "Yeah, tourist stuff -- just like you."

"Wonder what we'll find?" she mused aloud.

I shook my head. "It's a ridge, nothing more, with a few caves in "

"The prince's treasure's in one of the caves," Solum'ke said. "Etren crystals as big as my fist, the legend says."

"If this is the right ridge, and if the legend about the merchant prince is true," I cautioned. "But the treasure might be gone -- if there was any to begin with. Sevik and Hanugar are evidence enough we're not the only treasure-hunters on the planet. And don't forget, a lot of years have passed. Sol, don't be too hopeful about this." My words and my pheromones were doing nothing to dampen her enthusiasm.

"Take the sail raft in as close as you can." K'zk had moved up behind us. "Whatever you find -- put in these sacks. Don't try to hide anything from me. We'll split it fifty-fifty."

"What about us?" Hanugar interrupted.

"You have your lives," Solum'ke said, a threatening tone laced into her sultry voice. "Fifty-fifty means two shares -- ours and the Quohog's." Her pheromones backed up her threat, though the Corellians couldn't read them.

"Now, now," the Qwohog tsked, the noise sounding like an insect buzzing in his vocalizer mask. "We might spare them just a little bit if they lend a hand."

I grabbed a couple of glow rods, got in the sail



raft, and helped Solum'ke climb in.

She was curious like a jarencat, and despite my best efforts I couldn't convince her to stay on the sail barge while I looked around. Sevik came along, and Hanugar took a one-man sail raft.

"Wonder what we'll find?" Solum'ke mused aloud as I steered the sail raft closer. "Wonder what we'll find?"

"Maybe nothing," I said -- again -- as I tied the raft off on a rocky protrusion.

Hanugar had already landed, and was heading into the largest cave at the top, the one that seemed to look like a beast's eye. Let him have that one, I thought, as I watched him scramble inside. If I was hiding a treasure, I would put it in the least likely spot. And the least likely spot that we could see tonight seemed to be the cave I noticed closest to the water, a narrow crevice that looked like a big black wrinkle. It would be a tight squeeze. The other caves were too small to even consider. It was possible there were more caves beneath the surface.

Solum'ke nudged me forward. I hated enclosed places. And I hated treasure hunts. Give me a handful of contracts on pirates, spies, and failed smugglers -- you'll get richer much faster.

Solum'ke passed a glow rod to Sevik. He still looked in sorry shape, despite her ministrations, but his eyes gleamed like hers at the prospect of wealth. *Was I the only one being realistic about this?* I wondered. *Was I the only one who knew we would be sailing away empty-handed?* Anything to humor Sol, though. Anything to make her happy. I felt her thick fingers brush my shoulder. She was right behind me. It was easy going at first, as there were few jagged edges to bite into our boots. The decades beneath the waves had smoothed the rocks' surfaces.

"Wonder what we'll find?" she whispered again.

I shrugged my broad shoulders and slid inside the crevice. The space was small, making me uneasy, and the glow rod Solum'ke held behind me lit the damp walls and sent shadows rollicking about the cramped confines. Our own silhouettes against the rocks seemed eerie and added to my queasiness. Still, I edged forward and down, following the natural shaft, then I stopped when I heard something crunch beneath my boot. I looked at the stone floor and blinked. Bones, humanoid ones from the looks of them. They were brittle with age, but white, picked clean by melk I guessed.

"Diergu-Rea?" Solum'ke's voice was tinged with just a touch of nervousness.

"What'd ya find?" Sevik called. He couldn't see anything around Sol's pleasantly stocky frame.

"What's left of earlier treasure hunters," I replied. Maybe they'd found the crevice on a Day of the Sepulchral Night decades ago and dallied too long, became trapped inside and drowned when the eclipse ended and the water rose. Or maybe something else had happened to them. I sped our course and wished we would have thought to buy rebreathers before we left port.

We must have been more than four meters below sea level when the passage became tighter still and pools of saltwater swirled around my knees in the depressions. No wonder the Qwohog was afraid to come down here. The water had so much salt in it that even my thick skin was irritated.

To complicate matters, I felt trapped, like a caged beast. I almost signaled Sol to turn back, but something sparkled ahead, quickening even my doubting heart. I pushed myself between the shaft walls and cringed when my shirt ripped on a rock. I felt the stone cut across my shoulder blades and felt the warmth of my blood running down my back. My back would heal, Sol would see to that, but the shirt wouldn't. And it was expensive, a gift she gave me on our first night here.

"How much farther?" Sevik called.

I didn't know, so I didn't answer. I continued to squeeze through the shaft and edge downward still. The walls were slick with moisture, and I suspected the glow rod light bouncing off the water was what caught my eye. I ran my finger along the stone in front of me and brought a drop to my lips. More saltwater. There must be cracks in the rocks someplace, letting a little bit of the sea in.

"There's nothing here," I whispered to Solum'ke. "Let's turn back and hope Hanugar was more successful."

I saw the dejected look on her face, read her pheromones that screamed disappointment, then her expression and mood instantly brightened. She was looking past me. I craned my neck and followed her gaze. Red crystals. A couple of shards sat on a ledge a little farther down. It was enough to make me forget my concerns and my claustrophobia and press onward.

"We found something!" Solum'ke passed on to Sevik. He let out a whoop behind her.

My boots crunched over more bones as I reached the niche with the crystals. Beyond, the shaft opened -- as did my mouth. A myriad of multicolored crystals littered the floor of a natural cavern, covering every bit of stone and twinkling merrily like fireflies in the light of the

glow rod. Some crystals winked up at us from below the surface of small pools, making it impossible to tell just how deep the wealth lay. Urns, miniature statues, hammered metal idols, and more caught Solum'ke's attention. A large wooden chest sitting amid the wealthy clutter caught mine. I let out a low whistle and padded toward it, my boot heels clinking across the crystals. I quickly knelt before the old chest. The wood stank, rotten with age.

"We're rich!" Solum'ke cried. "Oh, Diergu-Rea, I knew there was something to the legend. I just knew it! K'zk was right!"

I looked over my shoulder. She had set her glow rod down and was scooping up crystals, letting them fall through her fingers and clink against the floor. Sevik was busy skirting the edges of the saltwater pools. He started unrolling the canvas sacks K'zk had given us and was deciding what to fill them with first.

"These crystals are old, lover," Solum'ke said. She was holding one, almost reverently. "We'll be set for the rest of our lives." Bits of rotting leather were scattered here and there, remnants of the sacks that the crystals had once been stored in. She brushed the leather aside and plunked the crystals into her own sack. "This'll buy us our own freighter, a fleet of them, maybe a moon somewhere."

I returned my attention to the chest. It had a large, primitive locking mechanism that was rusted, as were the iron bands that cut across the discolored wood. An iron plaque on top had some type of inscription on it, but it was in a language I couldn't read. I reached to my waist and retrieved a Rodian throwing razor. Jabbing the pommel at the lock made a hollow sound that reverberated around the chamber. The lock wouldn't give. But the wood was old, and I redirected my attention to prying at it. It took me quite a while. How long I'm not certain, but eventually I cut a hole in the top of the chest. I reached for a glow rod, peered into the cavity, and sucked in my breath.

"Diergu-Rea, what'd you see?"

"Gems, crowns, the wealth of a prince, Sol," I answered hoarsely. My throat had gone dry. "Crystals not quite as big as your fist, but big. We're going to be very rich."

She squealed with delight and passed me a sack. I thrust my hand in the chest's opening, my fingers closed around the gems, and I started pulling them out. The light danced across their facets, and I enjoyed the view for a moment before I dropped them in the sack. My arm worked faster, in and out of the opening, retrieving sparkling gems as black as a midnight sky, pale blue ones in the shape of tears, orange ones that brightened with the heat of my hand, and more. I dropped a green-crystal necklace over Sol's head, and returned to scooping jewels into my sack. I let my thick fingers play along the surface of a large sunblaze, let myself get carried away.



I'm not sure how much time passed; time seemed irrelevant while there was all this loot about. But I know it was enough time to let me fill my canvas sack. I started stuffing my pockets full of the gems left in the bottom of the chest. I wasn't going to let even one bauble escape me.

"I can hardly lift this," Solum'ke grunted. She was a formidable Weequay, probably stronger than I, and the seams of her sack were threatening to split. "If this planet was more civilized, we could've rented droids to help us carry this."

"Not many droids on Zelos II," Sevik cut in. He was obviously strong, too. He had two bulging sacks, each tossed over a shoulder.

"In fact, there's not many..."

His words trailed off when I waved at him. I cocked my head to the side and listened. Water. "Something's wrong," I said. My pheromones told Solum'ke I was worried. I shouldered my sack, took one of the glow rods, and eased my way by Sevik and into the tunnel.

I'd made it to the narrowest part of the shaft when I realized something was very definitely wrong. A rivulet of water was running down the rocky floor, the source of the noise. At first it looked like a trickle, but as I stared, the water spread out and was coming quicker, becoming a stream. It rushed into the pools of water that were in the depressions of the tunnelway, then came out the other side like a miniature waterfall.

"Sol! We've got to get out of here, now! Grab what you've got and let's go! Fast! I think the sea is rising!"

I heard Solum'ke scabble across the crystals on the floor behind me. A glance over my shoulder revealed that Sevik's feet were rooted to the spot, his eyes transfixed on all the crystals we were leaving behind.

"Sol!" I shouted, nodding toward our guest.

She gave him a harsh nudge that seemed to snap him back to reality. He brought up the rear of our little entourage, carrying his sacks practically effortlessly. It was tougher going climbing the shaft. It was steeper than I'd realized, and the floor was slippery. As we neared the opening, the water came rushing in even faster, surging around our knees, then our thighs.

A moment later, my head poked out of the opening, and I balanced on the ledge to keep from falling into the sea -- which was lapping at my waist now. I let the glow rod slip from my fingers -- I didn't need it. The sky was lighter, the eclipse ending, the tides rising quickly. I started scrambling up what was left of the ridge, motioning Sol to follow me.

Hanugar's sail raft was heading toward the barge -- along the deck of which all the Qwohogs stood. Our sail raft was ruined -- there was a deep gash in its hull where the repulsorlift mechanism rested. The mechanism was a useless piece of history, shattered by being dashed against a sharp coral spike. The sail raft still floated -- but like a primitive boat -- on the water, not above it. And it was without any power.

A wave broke against my chest, threatening to push me under. The sea was rising even faster now, and within minutes I knew we'd be treading water -- or drowning if we didn't drop the gems. "When the sea gets a little higher, I'll bring the sail barge in!" K'zk hollered. He called something else, but his words were lost by the crash of a wave against the rocks around us.

The minutes seemed to crawl by as the sea rose up to our shoulders. We watched Hanugar tie his sail raft to the rail and climb onto the barge. Hanugar's raft was pulled up.

The raft! Our raft! My eyes searched about and locked onto our damaged one. It was drifting away from us. It would do to keep us above the water.

"Hurry!" I yelled to Solum'ke, as I gestured toward the raft. I'd sighted a couple of melk heads in the distance -- naturally heading in our direction. And I desperately wanted to be out of their element fast. I felt the sting of the saltwater against my back where I'd cut it, and I knew my blood was seeping into the sea. It would lead the melk straight to us.

"Where's Sevik?" Solum'ke shouted. She'd somehow managed to reach the raft and tossed her sack into its bottom. She hefted herself over the side and started using her arms as paddles to drag the crippled raft toward me.

The water was up to my chin now, and I had to point my head toward the lightening sky to keep my mouth above it. "There's no sign of him!" I answered. "He might have drowned!"

Within a handful of heartbeats, she was tugging my sack and me into the raft. I glanced at the sail barge, at Hanugar who was standing at the railing. Then my mouth dropped open as I saw Sevik climbing up the side of the ship, his two sacks still over his shoulders. It would have been physically impossible for him to have swum so far with the weight of the crystals. Unless... I looked closer, spotted an repulsorlift belt around his waist. "Why you slimy excuse for a Nimbanese jowl-preener..."

The rest of my words were drowned out by a wave crashing against the side of our raft. I saw the sail barge hover higher and glide toward us.

"Throw us a line!" I yelled.

"The crystals first!" Sevik called back as he leaned over the side with a length of syntherope.

"No!" Solum'ke and I shouted practically in unison. We clutched our treasures.

K'zk was next to Sevik, peering over the side, a blaster rifle trained on Solum'ke's beauteous face. His voice cracked through the vocalizer mask. "We'll take all of the crystals -- one way or another."

Solum'ke made a move for her blaster. *What happened to fifty-fifty?* her pheromones asked.

"The saltwater," I whispered to her.

I heard her groan. Our blasters would be useless, ruined by our dip in the sea. I draped my arm around her shoulders, and she slumped against me, as we gave in and watched our sacks of gems and crystals rise into the traitorous Qwohog's sail barge.

"Just tell me," I called up to K'zk, "Were the Corellians involved in all of this? From the first? You obviously know them."

"Of course. Partners. Fifty-fifty," the Qwohog replied as he eased the sail barge a few meters away from our crippled raft. "I'd received a message they were marooned, so we had to pick them up before looking for the chine. *We were all looking for Zelosian's Chine* -- they on the skimmer and me with the barge. Two ships would have a much better chance of finding it. They truly fell afoul of the ridge, lost some of our mates in the process. Our captain won't be pleased."

"But this should mollify him!" Sevik chuckled, as he held up a big crystal.

"So why'd you need us?" I sneered.

"Insurance in case they didn't find the ridge," came the Qwohog's curt reply. "Or in case I couldn't save any of my Corellian friends. Couldn't deal with the saltwater myself, you know. Besides, you made fine extra pairs of hands. Sorry to leave you stranded -- you were good sports about the whole thing -- even paid to rent the sail barge. But we can't have you turning us in to the authorities before we've had a chance to get offworld."

"The corvette."

The Qwohog nodded. "Our ship. And we'd best hurry. The captain's waiting for us. Thanks for your help!"

As the moons faded and the sun came out, chasing away all signs of the eclipse, we watched the sail barge become a spot on the waves and then disappear. Our little sail raft bobbed near the reef, still afloat, protecting us from the melk.

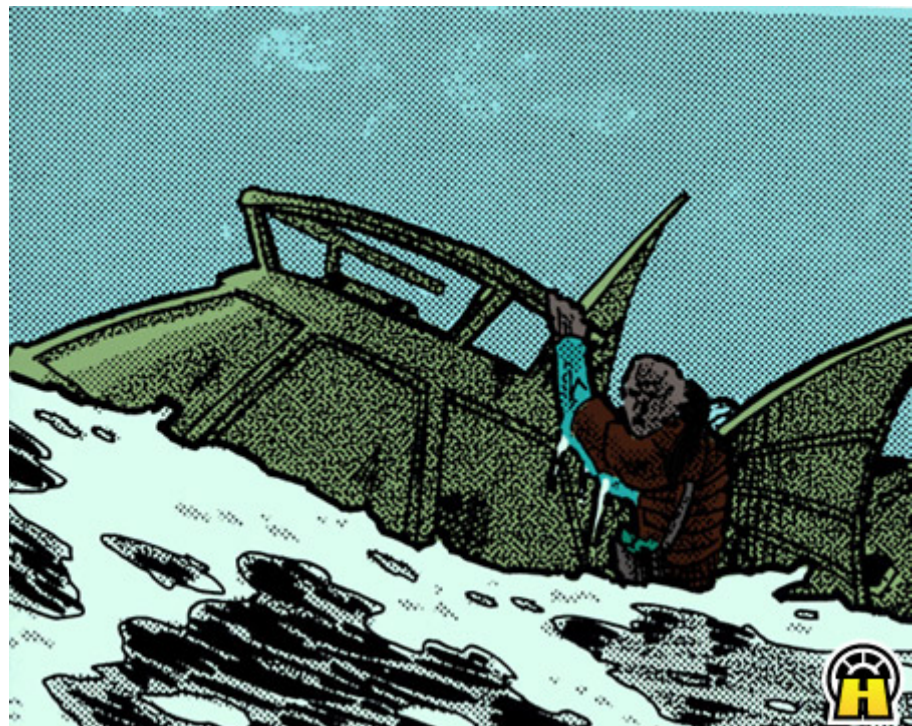
"We'll die out here," Solum'ke said. I'd never heard her sound so sad.

"We're not that far from the coast. Other barges will be out before the day is up -- headed toward the spas on Bryndas Islands. Someone will rescue us."

"We lost everything," she continued to moan. "All that treasure. All those..." She dropped a hand to her neck, to the green crystal necklace I'd put there. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of sunblazes. "Every pocket is full," I said. "More than enough to pay our rescuers and buy passage off this place -- buy us a small freighter, a new one maybe."

"And we still have our lives," she said, brightening a little. "Very long ones," I added. She caught the gleam in my eye. "Maybe in another dozen or so decades we can come back here -- during the next Day of the Sepulchral Night."

"Get what we left behind in Zelosian's Chine," she finished.





I drew her close, buried my nose against her still-damp neck. She smelled of the sea and of summer, intoxicating.

Solum'ke returned my embrace. "What are you thinking about?" she whispered after several quiet moments.

"A Qwohog."

"And two Corellians?"

"Shouldn't be too hard to find."

"Not for the best bounty hunters in the sector," she replied. "I think I hear another sail barge coming our way already."

